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Joana E.: Transgressing Taboos
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JOANA E.: TRANSGRESSING TABOOS

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Maria-Antònia Oliver's *Joana E.* represents the valorization of an aging woman whose strength, personal autonomy, and sense of purpose have been forged through a past of intense struggle. Oliver's novel, written in Catalan, displays two common threads appearing frequently in contemporary Catalan fiction by women. First, the choice of an aging female as protagonist or important secondary figure has appeared in many works by *catalanes* and in multi-faceted ways. Carme Riera's "Es nus, es buit" portrays an older woman who finds no joy or solace in her last years; instead, as she grows older her life becomes co-opted by "concerned" family members who circumscribe what little freedom she has, or had expected to achieve, in widowhood. Isabel-Clara Simó's "Engruna de res" also presents the despair of a mature woman who finds only unhappiness and solitude in her life, due to the emotional repression she experienced as a child, and which has colored her adult relationships. However, older or mature women also appear as figures of strength in many works, such as the elderly woman whose wisdom bolsters the young female protagonist in Oliver's *El vaixell d'iràs i no tornaràs*, and *Joana E.*'s feminist mother, who fans strength and independence in her daughter, guiding her towards the very same fortitude she herself possesses.

Joana E. may also be situated within the feminist trend apparent in many Catalan women writers that centers on breaking taboos. Perhaps the most visible figure of this iconoclastic group is Riera, whose fiction has portrayed tender love between two women; female masturbation; Spanish double standards, both societal and legal, that punish women for behavior deemed acceptable for men; and non-traditional objects of erotic desire, such as a voice or an exotic flower.

Situated within these two trends, Oliver's novel portrays a middle-aged woman whose melodramatic life has led her to her scandalous second wedding, which occupies the present time of the novel. Each chapter begins with a progressive moment of the wedding ceremony, during which varied faces capture the protagonist's attention and catapult her back into a series of flashbacks that narrate gradually what has led her to this moment in the present. Thus, Joana relates the mostly tragic events that have shattered her life but which have imbued her with strength: the accidental death of her parents, followed by the cruel revelation by her aunt that Joana is adopted; her marriage to an older man who informs her on her wedding night that he has married her only for her money and has no interest in a sexual

relationship with her; her love affair with a lawyer, which results in the birth of a child; the loss of almost all of her inheritance; until, in the final flashback, the nature of the mysterious scandal is revealed to the reader: Joana is marrying her own biological son. Although such an act would surely seem outrageous and immoral in unexplained circumstances, the events that have fostered this broken taboo frame the transgression as an act of vindication and victory over the social forces that have fought against Joana's burgeoning economic and personal independence. In an attempt to wrest her inheritance from her, Joana's greedy family disclaims the notion that the son born to Joana from her adulterous affair is in reality her child, thus denying her son, Joan, his legal rights of inheritance. But, since society, represented by her family, refuses to accept Joan as her true son, they have no other choice but to accept him as her husband. Therefore, whereas, due to Spain's laws of the period, Joana's first marriage transferred her inheritance and any true personal autonomy to her new husband, the protagonist's second marriage restores her fortune to her and to her son. Although through marriage at an early age Joana lost independence and potential self-determination, as a mature woman she concretizes her autonomy and power through the very same institution, profoundly undermining the purpose of marriage within the legalities of the social convention.

Instead of curtailing female autonomy and assertion, marriage becomes a transgressive breach, where romantic love and devotion are transformed into personal strength and autonomy. Moreover, by breaking the taboo of incestuous union, Joana's marriage represents an assault on the core of culture and civilization. The depth of subversion gained through incest manifests itself not only in the emotional horror that such a union inspires, but according to some cultures also carries the most serious of consequences for society as a whole, resulting in the destruction not only of the family but of the social order at large (Shepherd 140).

It should be noted that Joana's incestuous transgression occurs on the symbolic plane of social structures and legal union; that is, any erotic nature that might be attached to the union of mother and son is all but nullified. For, the author explicitly establishes the son as gay, thereby dispatching the threat of actual sexual incest, and leaving the breached taboo in place only as a symbol of social subversion. This transgressive act necessarily remains on the symbolic sphere because that is the level on which society's power most forcefully operates, and to silence society on that sphere is to undercut it most completely.

Therefore, since society's structures act to subdue, repress, define, and control women, any act of self-determination or self-definition necessarily places such a woman in the role of outlaw. Joana's

vengeance against the patriarchal society that has repressed her mercilessly rests within the most significant of social breaches, suggesting that, in order for the female self to emerge, she must break taboos. From the beginning of the novel, the author advises the reader and, symbolically as well as literally, establishes that society cannot contain Joana's emerging self: as she struggles into her wedding dress, the zipper bursts open, refusing once and for all to subdue the rebellious rolls of flesh. In fact, it might be noted that the breaching of the larger taboo rests among the overturning of numerous double standards for men and women; that is, Joana owns her own successful business, refuses to hire men, has committed adultery and, as a widow, has engaged in numerous affairs, including a variety of gigolos that she happily pays, and represents an older woman marrying a man "young enough to be her son."

The transgressive act of self-determination begins for Joana with the struggle towards recuperating the identity that was lost to her after the death of her parents. The loss of her parents followed by her Aunt Carme's cruel revelation that Joana is adopted leaves the young woman feeling as if "life had split in half" ("la vida s'havia doblegada per la meitat," 69). Her vulnerability to the fragmented state of her identity causes her to think of herself as "a demolished house, with the walls exposed to the air," ("una casa esbucada, amb les parets en l'air," 74). The sense of being removed from herself, no longer knowing who she is, heightens as she responds to her aunt "as if I weren't myself" ("com si no fos jo," 69). The paralyzing and doubling nature of this crushing fragmentation becomes obvious as she looks into a mirror and sees a figure who observes her as she stands passively.

In fact, the sense of mirroring appears in varied ways in the novel, and in most cases takes on a recuperative function. Perhaps the most explicit mirroring of subjectivity for Joana occurs with the conscious allusion to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Beginning with the title itself, *Joana E.*, Oliver deliberately casts her protagonist into the mold, and often, into the very footsteps of Jane herself. Nevertheless, although the novel resonates with characters and events from *Jane Eyre*, Oliver goes beyond simple imitation or narrative homage. For at moments of great despair Joana picks up Brontë's novel, as if searching for solidarity, wisdom, or signs of assertion to apply to her own life. Like Jane, Joana develops from a naive, victimized, and traumatized young girl into an independent woman who combats her fears to rise above societal or familial pressures that attempt to annihilate her.

Although Joana finds strength in that mirrored to her by a fictional character, she must also face those truths reflected to her by the "real" people of her world. From the initial moments of the novel, as Joana dresses, walks down the aisle, says her vows, poses with her

new husband for the traditional wedding portrait, she looks into the faces about her and then into the memories that these faces make spring forth, seeing the social forces that have produced the subject that she has become. That is, in Lacanian terms, the subject's identity is always located in the other, which in general terms might be society itself. The faces that she sees represent the Lacanian other where her identity is located, and to gaze into their faces is to see her own.

The search for identity represents a journey through memory in which a literal re-membling of the fragmented self and the experiences that have imprinted her subjectivity takes place. Nevertheless, memory is problematized as an imperfect recovery of events that affords a certain amount of comprehension only with the critical distance of time. When Joana returns as an adult to London in search of places she saw during a visit with her mother, she cannot locate them. What can be recuperated are the traces of the past that lay embedded within the unconscious and that have most deeply shaped the protagonist's psyche. The past, rather than revealing an accumulation of events that overpower the protagonist, instead represents evidence of personal rebellion, strength, and metamorphosis as well as giving witness to the patriarchal institutions that threaten female independence and self-worth. The narrative structure mimics this interweaving of past and present by beginning every chapter in the present with a moment of the protagonist's wedding, only to immediately carry the protagonist and the reader back through the events of her life that have destined this point in the present. Such a narrative gesture provides an intimate link between past and present, that emphasizes the fluid nature or overlapping of the past onto the present. That is, the present can only be understood through the past, just as the events of the past can only be interpreted by the wiser and more experienced mature Joana who regards those events from a distance.

The fact that the protagonist herself narrates her own story is suggestive of the self-determination struggled for and now possessed by the middle-aged Joana, and links the voice to her own emerging self. Instead of the apparently neutral third-person narrator that so often co-opts the female voice, the protagonist's self-narration indicates that Joana has broken free of the narrative shaping given to her life by others, such as her Aunt Carme and Joana's first husband. In fact, the highly oral style of Joana's self-narration supports what Carmen Martínez Romero characterizes as "*la escritura de lo no dicho*" (293), in which the most personal of themes, those most difficult to confess, become reality in the act of speaking them. Martínez Romero links the transgressive nature of this verbalization to the search for a "*definición propia de un 'yo'*" (293), that is, the search for identity.

In *Joana E.*, the transgressive nature of verbalizing what has been

suppressed goes beyond the story of one woman's subversive acts against her repression. For in portraying the nascent autonomy of Joana, Oliver also threads into the narrative the struggle of Catalonia and feminism to achieve recognition and strength. Furthermore, situating her narrative within the melodramatic mode allows the author to create layers of subversive possibilities as these struggles overlap. In his study on the genre, James L. Smith states that melodrama, through its use of suspense and sensational revelations that maintain a tension between the Manichean oppositions of good and evil, provides a fitting backdrop for social protest and criticism (73). Since melodrama sides with the powerless (Gledhill 21), it represents a forceful tool for displaying the non-compromising opposition between good and bad (Smith 73). Therefore, as Joana narrates her individual history, weaving through it in limited scope the parallel histories of Catalanian national history as well as the history of feminism, the Maniqueism of melodramatic structure extends to the social criticism of these parallel histories and to the world around Joana. The author clearly delineates the morally opposing forces in the novel, in which Joana finds herself buffeted by the destructive, controlling figures associated with conservatism, "españolismo," Castilian, and religion versus those characters who espouse Catalanian nationalism, feminism, and liberalism, and who represent a buoy of comfort and nurturing for her. Thus, the negative image of Joana's education at the local school run by nuns, where only Castilian is spoken, where education is confined to what a correctly submissive female should know, and where Joana spends her time bored and feeling isolated, directly opposes the breadth and interest of topics that her feminist mother explains to Joana in Catalan. True to melodramatic form, unlike Joana's non-religious "good" parents, the novel's villain, Joana's Aunt Carme, is clearly associated with religious hypocrisy, righteousness, and intolerance.

After she escapes from her Aunt Carme, Joana's first husband becomes the representative "bad guy" in the melodramatic display of moral opposition. His profession as a doctor symbolically suggests some hope of recovery from the deep emotional wounds inflicted by Aunt Carme. But, although the young Joana marries him to escape her heartless aunt, on their wedding night the doctor reveals that marriage will be no cure-all as he rejects a sexual relationship with Joana and informs her that he has married her only for her money and her father's medical clinic. In fact, their marriage represents a hollow, emotionless sham, in which her husband encourages hypocritical gestures, like a wifely kiss on his cheek when others are present, to give the appearance of a loving marriage. The same hypocrisy reappears after the Civil War, when the doctor insists that Joana regularly attend

mass to show a Nationalist stance. After Joana's lover melodramatically dies of a heart attack, just before her secretive divorce papers arrive, the doctor eventually agrees to take Joana back under his protection. The marriage then takes on a suggestion of the warring forces of the Civil War, with the doctor the victor and Joana the defeated.

Yet, the sense of rebellion that Joana felt when she first met her lover, returns, infusing her with vitality, purpose, and fortitude. This strength overrides the attempted channeling into feminine stereotypes that she has endured since the crushing loss of her family. Instead, drawing on the advice she received as a girl from her mother's feminist friends, Joana springs into action and determination: "Then I began to be a strong woman. Not tender, nor kind, nor understanding. Strong" ("Aleshores vaig començar a ser una dona forta. Ni tendra, ni amable, ni comprensiva. Forta," 187).

Although Joana's memories show the repressive effect the novel's villains have left on her, the flashbacks make explicit the positive mark made on her psyche by feminism. The explicit rendering of feminist ideology in *Joana E.* takes both directive aim towards necessary goals as well as tolerant comprehension of its contradictions and many forms. Although Joana recognizes her mother as a feminist, she realizes that her mother represents the oft-found contradictions implicit within the movement. That is, whereas Joana's mother argues with the local priest over women's reputation and rights, introduces the young girl to feminism through a feminist meeting in London, patiently explains the movement to her daughter, consistently educates herself on the woman's struggle, and encourages her daughter towards independence, she also deems it necessary that her daughter search for a special dress for a ball, lives in an economically traditional relationship with her husband, and, unable to part with her daughter, bypasses opportunities for liberal and higher education for Joana.

However, given the melodramatic bent of the novel, Joana is also exposed to the forces which seek to thwart feminist activity. In London, at a feminist meeting, Joana witnesses a man who exposes his penis to the group of women. But, melodrama encourages the victory of good over bad, so the man is overpowered by several surprisingly strong women and led out of the room, causing Joana to later compare the man's genitals to the "gusanito" of her childhood friend, and to realize that what she saw inspired no fear. Nevertheless, the scene which suggests that feminism can overpower phallism is balanced by the ensuing scene showing the dangers of outspoken feminism as policemen mounted on horses violently storm into the street, and overtake the group of women demonstrating for female rights.

The feminist motif that appears throughout the novel is that

women must be economically independent in order to be truly free. Towards the end of the narrative, Joana and a female neighbor open a business that not only allows Joana to achieve the financial independence dictated by feminism but makes way for her own contribution to the movement by employing only women. To these women, Joana offers female solidarity and fair working conditions with the comprehension of the domestic demands made upon women. This act, as well as the intimated protest against the legal and religious structures that subjugate women into a state of dependence and powerlessness, extends the protest of a single individual's fate to the legal and social status of Catalanian women.

Based on a true story, the novel teases the reader with its blurred line between fiction and reality, a fact which may suggest the potential that exists outside the world of fiction for the powerful figure of a mature woman characterized as strong, self-defined, and independent. Although couched within the melodramatic mode, where good and victory are often symbolized by youth and angelic beauty, the author does not portray Joana's fortitude at the expense of denying the aging of her body: "I'm forty-eight years old, I'm fat, I have wrinkles, my knees hurt, my bladder's been operated on, and I can't run like when I was twenty" ("Tenc quaranta-vuit anys, estic grassa, tenc arrugues, em fan mal els genolls, m'han operada de la bufeta i ja no puc córrer com quan en tenia vint," 50). Although she's not pleased with the effects of age on her body, "it's no longer necessary for me to like it in the mirror to feel sure of myself" ("ja no em cal que m'agradi al mirall per sentir-me segura," 32). For the mirror reflects to Joana what the novel reflects to the reader: the image of a mature woman whose sense of self does not rely on a socially defined role, but instead on the subversive power of self-determination.

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